

The Plight of Art Criticism

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Abstract

The principles of artistic judgment did not have a particular scientific organization. This is because aesthetic judgment was confused either with logical or with moral judgment, or was allowed to disappear in mystical soaring, or made trivial in technical empiricism. With the aim of finding principles of judgment, critics have turned to aesthetic heresies and arrived at good concrete judgment, through an attempt at adjustment between principles and intuitions. The autonomy of art has been recognized and made to consist in a spiritual activity, a creative activity and not imitative, distinct from logical activity. To logical activity belongs the rational activity, as to the aesthetic belongs imaginative or intuitive activity. What is called beauty, when it is not an object of the senses only, is the perfection of art.

Keywords:

Moral beauty, mystical criticism, genius, primitivistic criticism, organismic criticism, artistic actions

Introduction

The study of art is involved with the history of thinking about art. The method of any given art indicates the ideas current in the time and place in which it was made. However it has a limitation as it gives no encouragement to cultural interpretation of a work of art despite the importance of intuition in art which has no need of a master, and does not need to borrow the eyes of anyone. The total effect of intuition is a concept. The difference between a scientific work and a work of art lies in the difference of the total effect of their respective authors. Each work of art has its own aesthetic approach and taste. However, today the consideration of beauty in art is rare because beauty has a moral character identified by a mathematical character and geometrical proportions. This is because the necessity of imitating nature follows the concept of physical and moral beauty, and follows mathematical proportions and nobility of sentiment. Progress in technique like the ability of people to look at works of art from different points of view, such as the ability of imitation and artistic effect, is not art. Imitation makes what is seen, but imagination will make what it has not seen. However, Philostros does not distinguish between imagination of things not seen and the creative imagination of the artist, that is, between the visible and the invisible, between the material and the spiritual, because imagination will make what it has not seen.

Beauty, Virtue, and Color

According to Plato, beauty in itself is not found in the living creatures or their representations, but in geometrical figures. These are beautiful in themselves, by their own nature, and with their

beauty goes sensual pleasure. Aristotle confirmed the mathematical origin of the beautiful. Both, searching for beauty outside nature and art, he found the principle of art not in beauty but in imitation. Nevertheless Plutarch and Stocics alluded to the problem by taking away from the body and reserving for the soul all reason of beauty. The ugly becomes a means of setting off the beauty of the soul. Vergel had said that virtue has a better grace in a fine body, while Seneca denied it, "Virtue has no need of ornament, it is its own beauty, but to adorn the body by the beauty of the soul". (Remember Adolf Loos and his view on ornament). Plutarch affirmed that physical ugliness is beautiful in itself when moral beauty is added. Zeuxis said that easy and rapid execution could not give to a work of art a very long life, or that perfect beauty which is the result only of diligent care.

When colors dominate form the result is a barbaric taste and ugliness. Aristotle, said that if one smears a surface, even with the most beautiful colors, he would not be able to charm so much as another who draws only the contours of a figure in simple white. Philostratos said that even we use only white to paint an Indian, he will still appears black. From this one can understand of what kind was the pleasure the ancient people called aesthetic phantasy. Therefore in antiquity there is a relationship between the rational aesthetic and the preference of form to color. Barbarians cannot appreciate beauty; they display the magnificence of their treasures in order to astonish spectators and not to charm them, because to barbarians what is gorgeous is considered beautiful. Both Pling and Vitruvius made coloring responsible for the decay of art. Against this Plutarch said that coloring is superior to drawing because it is the source of a greater illusion.

The Middle Ages

The destruction of the contact between art and nature facilitated for artists the creation of masterpieces in Romanesque and Gothic architecture. During the Middle Ages art criticism divides itself into three modes, the mystical aesthetic, the iconographical repertory, and the body of receipts. St. Augustine follows the ideas of Plotinus. For him ugliness is not a lack of form but also a minor degree of beauty. St. Augustine does not love painting and sculpture among the arts, but music and architecture. He also prefers a rigorous correspondence among the parts, and he did not feel the need of liberation from the mathematical reason. He occupied himself with the column and in the consideration of space as an element self-emancipated. St. Thomas in the 13th Century exalts the value of the senses. The senses delight in proportion as if it were in us. Witelo said that artificial things appear more beautiful than the natural because they reveal a new world is born. He also adores light, according to the neo-platonic tradition.

In the Middle Ages art was employed for the display of religious facts, but Ruskin sees that when religion is adopted for art there is moral indifference and the result is not true art, while when there is a true religious feeling art may be spontaneously created. Ruskin considers the function of the artist is to be a seeing and feeling creature, the work of his life is to be twofold only to see to feel, and to enlighten what is incomprehensible. The aim of all noble art should enlighten what is in comprehensible, to incorporate the things that have no measure, and immortalize the things that have no duration. All that is infinite and wonderful having in it that spirit, and power which

man may witness, but not weigh, conceive, but not comprehend, love but not limit and imagine but not define. Nowadays, the philosophical spirit had prevailed over the imaginative.

Ruskin affirms that true architecture when it is not pure engineering construction, is the work of potential sculptors and painters and must be observed as painting and sculpture. He admits that the Gothic architects are rude and uncultivated due to their absolute freedom in ornamentation and spontaneity of creation, free from any pride of perfection. “All admit irregularity as they imply change, and to banish imperfection is to destroy expression, to check erection, to paralyze vitality”. Ruskin rebels against the rules of drawing and substitutes for them the principle of love; otherwise it will not be right. Love’s misrepresentation being truer than the most mathematical presentation.

The taste for middle Ages appears in reaction from the neo-classical. In the nineteenth century, idealistic criticism and romantic art declined from their directive function, they looked to the art of the past with tragic mind, and they proposed the imitation of the antique or of Gothic revival. The limits of their function as critics was to nourish illusions of an artistic illusions, but that did nothing but aggravate the detachment between criticism and contemporary art to confuse entirely the classic and the neo classic which weakened the whole conception of art. Neo-classicism was abandoned.

Shakespeare once said, “If you judge Gothic architecture by Grecian rules, you find nothing but deformity, but when you examine it by its own rule, the result is quite different.” Maybe the artists think more of the subject than of the mode of representing it, and do not reflect upon modes of representation, which is the function of criticism, but abandons itself to the inspiring motive. The condemnation of the Gothic temple is because it does not resemble the Greek temple.

The Gothic style in France is linked with Viollet-Le-Duc the architect and the critic, his restoration of ancient monuments, reveal that Gothic art restored neo-classicism. Pugin affirms that Gothic is not a style but a religion and more than the Greek style, and he dreams of the restoration of the middle Ages which originated in England, he judges the work of art from the point of view of the morality of its creator, hence the obligation of the most absolute sincerity and truth, according to which the essential elements of construction must be clearly revealed in architecture.

The Renaissance

Raphael, Michel Anglo, Correggio, Leonardo, Titan, and Alberti each in his unique way created his own artistic universe.

Alberti

Throughout the 15th Century an intense faith in man, in his beauty, in his power, in his reason, is the basis of art as of science. It is necessary to remember all the sentimental value which science

had assumed in the 15th Century to understand how Alberti could consider perspective vision as a painter and not as a mathematician. The origin of art coincides therefore in history and in the psychology of the artist, and has become the eternal. Vision is substituted for technique. The disadvantage is in the projection into art of that scientific rationalism that should be reserved only for criticism. Alberti, however, does not exclude the mystical attainment of God, better than utilitarian things. And even in his pure sensibility he finds the tempering of his intellectual severity. “Beautiful are the planes that have the surfaces united in such a way that the lights and shades are agreeable and soft without any hardness of contour”.

Here is the contemplation of a beauty that has no mathematical reason that excites ecstasy. And even his love of relief, of surfaces turning round, of the column and the sphere, is the love of a physical beauty which transcends the interest of natural truth. He loves light and fresh colors; he loves them so much that he wishes to obtain from them, as from a temptation. He rejects the gold. Two reasons led him to that: disclaim of materials, and light and shade, without which one cannot obtain the relief necessary to perspective vision. The conception of shade as the artistic quality of every form is completed by the sense of necessity for movement, which is the source of all life and at the same time a statement of an artistic purpose, and is realized by the colorists. Alberti interests himself also in moral expression for the sake of conformity of the coherence of the representation, but compositions must not be crowded, for otherwise the plastic value of each figure would be lost. It is necessary to avoid excess of ornament, which is contrary to the essence of beauty. Perspective vision is demanded as the ordering of vaults and columns, and there appears a preference for circular planes which respond better to the plastic value of the edifices, which was closer to the art of his time so that it may be regarded as the magna Charta of the Italian Renaissance.

Leonardi Da Vinci

The fifteenth to the sixteenth century is distinguished in art by the end of the primitives and the appearance of a group of masters, Leonardo, Raphael, Michael Angelo, Titian, who for a long time were regarded as the maturity and perfection of art. The artist then demonstrates not only technique but also the physical and moral knowledge of nature. Painting says Leonardo “is not only a science, it is even a divinity, because it transforms the painter’s mind into something to the mind of God”. This is Neo-Platonism, but with a new accent, because the painter is opposed to the scientist who is simply man. Leonardo insists on the difference “Science considers the quantity whilst art considers the quality of things. The difference between art and science was not clear, and therefore Leonardo considered the primal truth of art as the preparation for the truth of science, “Painting is the origin of all arts and crafts, and is also the source of all science”.

Leonardo used his art, his drawing in order to know anatomy, perspective and all the mathematical sciences that then were known. Leonardo once said, “When we look at an object which is darker than atmosphere, we see it becoming lighter than atmosphere, it becomes darker as its distance increases”. Looking at nature, Leonardo observes that shades are not black, as Alberti thought, but blue. Leonardo knew that red and yellow have their splendor in light, but blue

and green; have their greatest value in shade. He sees very well the effects of tone in nature; he does not love color, but wishes to see it in atmosphere that must fill the perspective void and envelop the figures. For him quality is all degrees of shade, quantity is the size of shades and the relation of size among them figure is the geometrical form of shade. Leonardo's idea, that movement is the source of all life, and a statement of the artistic purpose.

Venetians discussed art, not to discover scientific truth but to define sensuousness, they began with the steeping nude Venus by Giorgione in the sixteenth century, and the first consequence of such a condition of mind was a revolt against order. Florentine painting arose as a perspective order against the chromatic chaos of the middle Ages. Pino states that it is rare for painter to be able to follow proportions in a figure because every figure must be painted in movement which destroys abstract proportion. Dolce sees that the expression of feeling in painting is something additional which must be produced by the imagination of the public. Pino considers that the perfection of art is the fusion of the drawing of Michel Angelo and the coloring of Titan. The disappearance of individuality brought with it the decadence of art.

Mannerism and the 17th Century

The true critics of the Renaissance were the mannerists but they were mistaken as artists and critics because they chose from the works of the masters most appreciated those elements that they believed to be art which were all rather symbols of art than art itself, however, their attitude was a critical attitude, and therefore the treatises on art of the mannerists have a greater importance than their painting, that which had the name "Treatise on the Art of Painting in (1584) of Gian Paolo Lomazzo. His taste is based upon that of Leonardo integrated with that of Michel Angelo and Raphael. He appreciates the chromatic alchemy of Titan and the Venetians in general. He formulated a program of eclecticism but indicates its dangers. For him art is the imitation of nature and the expression of ideas. He feels neither the value of form in itself, nor of color in itself, and seeks the essential medium in movement-light. His treatise consists of three parts; theory practice and iconography. This was the maximum result of Italian mannerism of the 16th. Century.

The 17th Century was a widespread reaction to Italian mannerism which had reached all countries, a reaction which led to an exceptional flourishing of art. There were a new order which repaired the material and moral disorder into which art had been thrown by arbitrariness of theory, facility of hand false emphasis on feeling and superficiality of intensions. Their reaction was born of the very need to create according to the personality of the individual. They drew from all the great models those elements that considered the best of art. They were reformers of the mannerism. The need had arisen for moral beauty. The nude human figure is seen as a canon of abstract form but having a rule given for religious expression and impressed upon it an undertone of sensual pleasure, veiled with morality.

In Italy the artistic tradition was alive for rationalism, and to become Platonic or neo-Platonic, but in France the scientific spirit and the genius of Descartes indulged a more exacting rationalism.

The French judged art independently of the qualities of sensibility and confused the progress of philosophy with that of art. Therefore the concept of reason was opposing the concept of taste in judging beauty. To the scientific intellect it is called genius. There arose the distinction between artists who have genius without taste and others who have taste without genius. Such a way of conceiving art criticism not only represents an advance upon that of the preceding age, but that it also contains an absolute and eternal truth.

Given the confusion worked by the Counter Reformation between pomp art and religion, the idea of beauty was interpreted according to social choice and the moral beauty was not seen independently of physical perfection. Therefore, the identification of moral beauty with plebeian forms was only possible in Protestant lands through the work of Rembrandt. In the 17th Century, the form of the lives prevails. In the categories of judgment on painting it is not sought to give a theoretical systematization, but it is preferred to exercise judgment on the individual works and the individual artists. The interesting thing is that the etchings of Rembrandt were much more appreciated at Florence than his painting, sculpture and architecture. Bernini knew how to give unity to painting and indicates his stylistic synthesis in a freedom of touch.

In 1674 transformation occurred in the world of art criticism. There were critical discussions on the values of painting with reference to this or that artist, since painting through the limitations of nature is an idea of corporeal thing, and is valid only when it is controlled by a rational doctrine. The subject of painting is the action of man, and in a subordinate way of animals and other natural objects, and by action, meaning mimicry which is a rhetorical artifice. Form then is reduced to an expression for unity of design and is substituted by the ideal of beauty; clinging to composition in order to arrive at ideal beauty. Composition is spiritual because it is made in the imagination, which is the soul of painting. There is a distinction between beauty and grace, in which beauty has the part of proportion, or physical harmony, while grace regards the sentiments of the mind, nobility in the subject and pleasure in the execution. A scientist is he who formulates a theory according to which all knowledge derives from the senses. From the conflict of opinions arose two results; that of liberation from superstition of ancient art, and that of reflecting upon the difference between science capable of progress and artistic values.

Pictorial movement of the 18th Century

A great flowering of decoration was in the pictorial movement of the 18th Century, transforming the baroque into rococo in order to discover new architectural moods, and new values. But this caused a reaction against the pictorial and the rococo because the rococo is associated with the aristocratic French classes. Then arose a type of philosophical reaction other than artistic which created a detachment from tradition. Truth of art was then identified with truth of reason, which is substituted by the principle of relativity of taste which must be the judges of art. The need of freedom from the rules is manifested in the taste and the theorization of the picturesque which is recognized as a value irreducible to the phenomena of the visible.

Neo-classicism

When the writers on aesthetics, or critics referred to figurative art they could not free themselves completely from the technique of the period posterior to the primitives hence they declared that classicism must be admitted in plastic art. The basis of the revaluation of the primitives was due to moral and religious sentiments. Theoretical insufficiency was the reason of weakness of criticism. Instead of making a rational criticism of mystical art, there was a mystical criticism of art. Religious needs for the mysticism of nationality and effusion of sentiment took the place of criticism, to chant the marvels of fidelity and loyalty, where ideas not only replaced aesthetics but the history itself was lost.

The neo-classicists renounced understanding the value of the creative subject. The romantics through their intemperance had this merit of transferring criticism from the object to the subject of retracing through the picture or the statue, the personality of the creative artist, with his sentiments, his ideals and his torments. The whole life of the mind was to engage in criticism, reason is not enough. And to have impressed their criticism with religious and moral sensibility is the imperishable merit of the romantics.

The distinction of styles, sublime, beautiful, of imitation was useful to the criticism of art because it determines the artistic individualities. The detachment from contemporary art had damaged the neo-classic criticism, and also the primitivist criticism. The most ancient men spoke instead by the senses and passions, and did not understand if they did not imagine. They painted that which they see as they see it, live, potent, and monstrous in disorder or order as the senses offer. Knowledge of the value of the primitive in art was due to experience of poetry. Art criticism even nowadays cannot avoid either the experience of primitive art, or the primitivistic criticism of the romantics. One could, therefore, appreciate the proportions rather than the creative value of a statue, therefore the copy, cold and mechanical, of a Greek masterpiece was venerated as a model of beauty.

Kant

In the transition between the era of illuminist and that of idealism stands Kant, who justified systematically the judgment of taste. The search for a principle of taste was a vain fatigue because that which is sought is impossible and contradictory in itself. There was not a science of beauty but only a criticism of it. In such a manner Kant realized the distinction between the subjective and the arbitrary in art and in artistic judgment, rejected all rules in art. Kant realized the distinction between the subjective and the arbitrary in art and in artistic judgment, rejected all rules in art.

Kant understood that art belongs to a tradition that it is necessary to follow not to imitate which would mean to renounce the originality of genius. Art is distinguished from science, because the artistic genius makes to coincide the finite and the infinite while science work without genius only on the finite and the conscious, and therefore science follows art. Characteristic beauty is

the root of beauty which is the dominating essence of form, to the beauty of the mind in itself. Beauty becomes concept, universalized no longer individual.

Kant made a distinction between free beauty and dependent beauty. Free beauty is beauty that in itself has no intrinsic meaning. Dependent beauty is the beauty of a horse, or a building, all of which presuppose the concept of an aim which determines what the object is and therefore, the ideal of its perfection. Idealistic aesthetics recognized only dependent beauty and thought of artistic form as the perceptible manifestation of the idea.

Fiedler

To Fiedler, objective perception is the proper sphere of art so that vision and representation, intuition and expression become identified with the work of art. The essential character of art leads to the concept of productive contemplation which in turn, relates art to the problem of cognition, excludes sentiment from art, and deduces art to knowledge of form, to pure visibility. Fiedler saw that in contrast for sight there are activities that are immediate outgrowth of visual sensation, for instance, gesturing, drawing, painting and modeling. For this reason painting sculpture and architecture have their own laws which are not the laws of nature but visibility. Nature can never become the object of artistic representation. A painter's ideal world is not nature improved by the rules but a way of understanding and representing nature that has its roots in the individual. If technique is treated as something learned, style takes the place of art.

Fiedler rejects the study of architecture as a manifestation of peoples and periods. The essence of architecture would thus be a progress from the formless to the formed. The formless, that is the material of art, is the original practical demand for enclosed and covered space. Form is not a pre-existing fact that must be impressed on the material, for it has no existence outside the material. This is the reason why the Greeks achieved architectural perfection. The Romanesque style with its enclosed spaces covered by vaults is much superior to Gothic. The Gothic displayed marvels of structural ability but is not a coherent development and does not fulfill a functional requirement. In a Romanesque shell, the shell is unified, there is no question of a vault punctuated by support but a vault that rises from the very ground through the solid walls. The Romanesque style abandons columns for piers. These piers are in reality pieces of wall left between interstices and their most perfect expression is the clustered pier because it is a direct continuation of the ribbed vault.

Hegel

Hegel opposes the imitation of nature, and considers it an act of superfluity. Therefore art is a philosophical error, with the consequence that art is to be considered as dead when true philosophy is born, not only in ideal order, but also in the temporal historical reality. Hegel makes a correspondence between the three figurative arts: architecture, which is symbolical; sculpture, which is classical; and painting which is romantic. Hegel could not consider as perfect art either architecture, which was only symbolical, or modern sculpture or painting which though it had more spiritual value, was nevertheless less art the sculpture. The architecture of the ancient orient

to which sculpture is attached, is independent of all practical utility, and symbolism religion. Greek and Roman architecture has a practical utility, and it is therefore dependent, and sculpture is detached from it.

Sculpture works an advance upon architecture, because instead of adopting masses of inert nature, it represents the animate living body, with which the mind is identified to sculpture to fully correspond the pagan religion and the pagan conception of human life. Sculpture must see only the invariable character free from every extraneous influence. Painting no longer shows objects as they are in themselves, but transforms them into figures, which are a mirror of the mind. The spectator contemplates in a manner more free from all objective reality.

The 21st Century

Criticism now in the 21st century concentrates attention on visual symbols leaving to others the task of speaking of the correctness of the coloring and drawing, the effects of the environment and modeling, and some concerns with the psychological expression, and the art's vision. How then can one arrive at a synthesis without a knowledge of the thesis and antitheses instead of being occupied in studying the emotional and visual phenomena? Since the emotional emphasis that makes them art is abstracted. Even when it is abstracted from the work of art that it informs, is charged with historical connotations, instead of the historical development. The experience of melancholy and tenderness is thus an experience of classes, systems, schemata, and symbols that is indispensable to the process of coming to understand the individuality of any work of art. That is the moment the viewer exercises taste.

Cubism

In Cubism the ascendancy of sensation is expressed in purely geometric terms. It is a matter of creating new objects that cannot be compared to objects existing in reality. It is precisely this that distinguishes synthetic Cubism from analytical Cubism. Cubism on the one hand resolved itself into pure emotion or color sensations giving rise to a decorative formula that rapidly spread everywhere, it on the other hand led back to statements by Ruskin and William Morris on the value of medieval art as a collective or social art and of spirituality inherent in the progress of work. Carra criticized Cubism for being static and dealing with objects and insisted that Futurism was an art that no longer revolved around objects but around a state of mind. It is at this point that the artistic movement that began with Cubism is transformed into a useless neo-primitivism, or worse, neo-classicism, the inevitable reaction to the most important characteristic Futurism shared with Cubism that is anti-traditionalism.

Surrealism

The interest in Surrealism lies in masses profound and persistent need for what is irrational, marvelous and enigmatical and what belongs to the world of dreams. Now on aesthetics the tendency is to modern art and less to the art of the past in an attempt to adjust aesthetic thought to the requirements of contemporary criticism which are conceptualistic criticism, which is rich in quality and great in its aesthetic value, mechanical criticism which defines the field of aesthetics

as objective pleasure, Organismic criticism which is idealistic, considers the work of art as highly integrated, and Formalistic criticism which deals with perception. Consequently, it becomes necessary to consider form only in relation to itself, and to its own function so that it is the logical solution. Architecture is not the goal of progress but an agent that influences the collective consciousness and furthers the process of progress. Thus reality is no longer expressed in nullifying consciousness, as it was by the surrealists but is given a new value.

Conclusion

Without genius, which is a light of the spirit, one does not make art in spite of all the rules of the masters. Very important in criticism is the absence of preconceived ideas, because these may contain traditional ideas which cannot be checked. The work of art is dead if it is detached from the spiritual creative process. The spirit changes during its development. For this reason, Riegel lost sight of the eternity of the human spirit.

In the final analysis, the criticism of art is the criticism of artists. As a result criticism tended to be reshaped into artistic actions. Criticism is no longer criticism of the representation because the value of art resides beyond the representation in an active principle that guarantees that the sign survives the thing signified. Instead it lies in the recognition of this survival, or in the eternal newness and activity of the sign long after the object has been destroyed.

The principles of artistic judgment did not have a scientific organization, because aesthetic judgment was confused either with logical or with moral judgment, or was allowed to disappear in mystical soaring or, made trivial in technical empiricism. With the aim of finding principles of judgment, critics have turned to aesthetic heresies and arrived at good concrete judgment, through an attempt at adjustment between principles and intuitions. The autonomy of art has been recognized and made to consist in a spiritual activity, an activity creative and not imitative distinct from logical activity. To logical activity belongs the rational activity, as to the aesthetic belongs imaginative or intuitive activity. What is called beauty, when it is not an object of the senses only, is the perfection of art.